

Amazing Bird Nests

by Ron Fridell

Why are these bird nests so amazing?

Genre

Expository Nonfiction gives facts and information. Read for facts about bird nests.



Robin feeding worm to chicks.

A Safe Spot

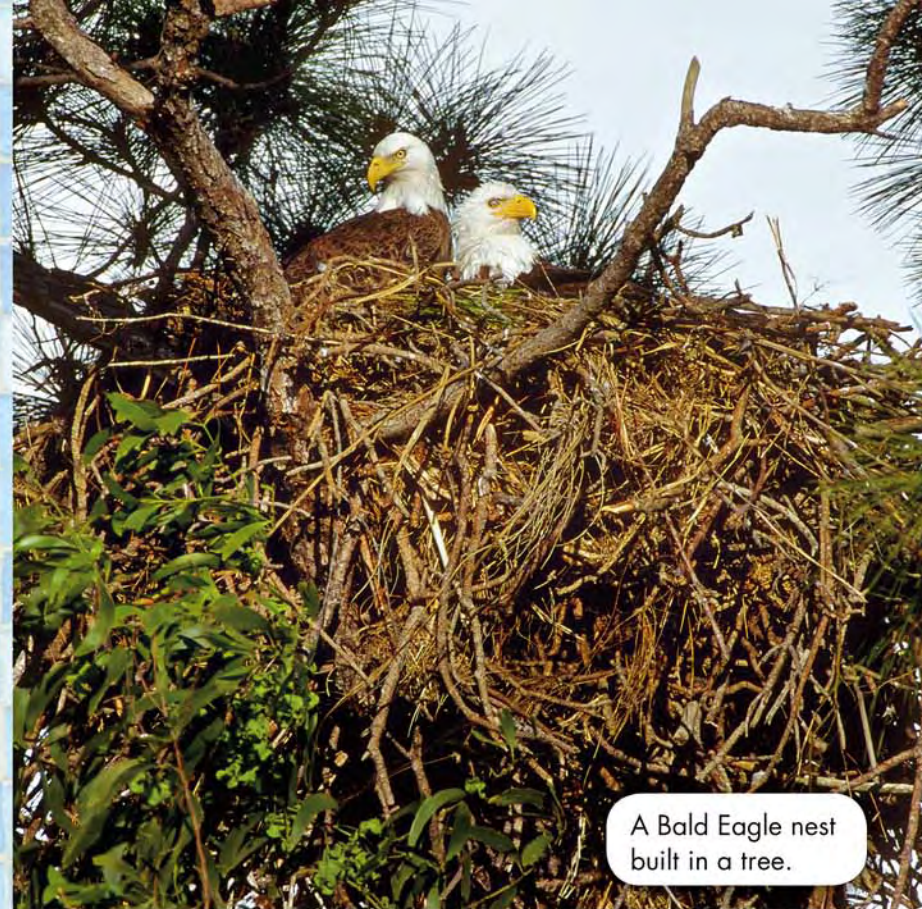
Look up at the sky. A bird swoops low and lands on a tree branch.

It is spring, the season when birds build nests and lay eggs. The bird hops into its nest and sits gently on the eggs. The nest is their safe spot. It shelters the eggs from wind and rain. It also protects them from snakes, raccoons, and other hungry predators.

After the eggs hatch, the chicks no longer have the shell to protect them. Now the nest helps keep them warm and safe from harm. The parents feed the chicks until they grow bigger and stronger. Then everyone flies away, leaving an empty nest.



Gray Rat Snake raiding a bird's nest.



A Bald Eagle nest built in a tree.



A Hummingbird nest built on a pinecone.

Very Small and Very Big

Some birds build very small nests. Hummingbird nests are smallest of all. Some are just an inch across and an inch deep. Talk about small spaces! When the tiny female hummingbird sits on the eggs, her head sticks out one end of the nest and her tail out the other.

Some birds build very big nests. The nest of the American Bald Eagle can be ten feet across and twenty feet deep. It can weigh as much as two tons. That's more than most cars weigh! Eagles build their huge nests way high up at the tops of trees and mountains. That makes sense. Eagles are birds of prey. They are hunters. They spend their time high in the air, looking down for their next tasty meal.

All Kinds of Shapes

Birds should be proud of their nests. Each kind of bird builds its own special type of nest. Hummingbirds build little nests shaped like cups. Eagles build big, flat, platform nests. Woodpeckers build cavity nests by pecking holes in trees.

Which bird should win the prize for best nest-builder? How about the weaver bird? It uses its sharp bill like a needle to sew strips of fresh grass together. Then it weaves them into a nest. Weaver birds use a dozen kinds of knots to build their amazing home. It takes them about 500 trips to cut down and carry back all the grass to do the job.



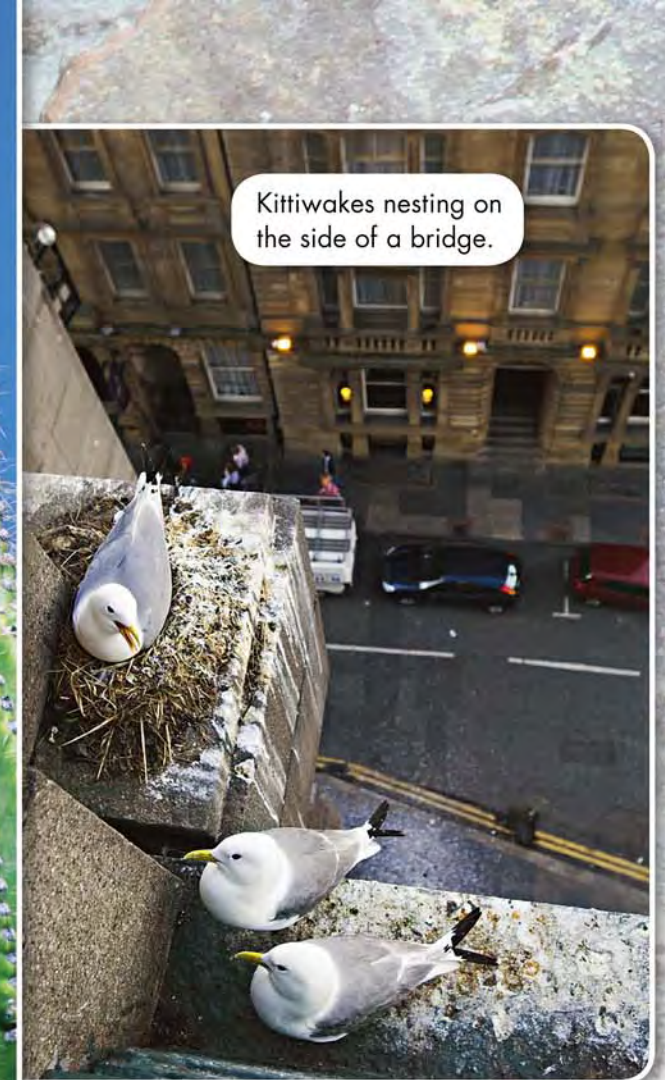
A Sociable Weaver nest colony in a Quiver tree.



Ruppell's Weaver building a nest.



Gila Woodpecker at nest in a Saguaro cactus.



Kittiwakes nesting on the side of a bridge.

All Kinds of Places

Birds live in forests, deserts, grasslands, and wetlands. They live in the country and the city.

As cities take the place of forests and fields, birds must adapt to changing environments. City birds must build their nests in new and unusual places. Some use telephone poles, street lights, and mailboxes. Others build their nests in unused chimneys, flowerpots, and empty cans. Sometimes these city nests get in our way.

Watch Them Grow

Let's say a bird starts building a nest on the ledge outside your window. You could chase it away. Or, better, you could welcome the bird and watch it do its amazing work. Most birds take a week or two to build a nest.

Most bird eggs hatch in about three weeks. Baby birds usually spend another couple of weeks living in the nest. Watch them and you will see how the parents feed and care for their chicks. Keep watching as your bird family grows up and, finally, flies away.



One-day-old chicks

All Kinds of Stuff

It's amazing how much strange stuff birds use to build their nests. Some birds use old snake skin in their nests. Some birds use sticky spider silk to hold things together. To make the inside of the nest soft and warm, some birds use animal hair. Others line their nests with more than a thousand feathers!



Great Grey Bowerbird decorating its bower, or nest.





Raven chicks in nest built from barbed wire, plastic, garbage, and bones.

Even More Stuff

City birds have lots of different materials to choose from. In some city nests you will find bits of paper and plastic wrap. In others you'll see paper clips, thumbtacks, hairpins, rubber bands, and barbed wire. One person even found money tucked away in a bird's nest—a five-dollar bill!



Swiftlets in nests with eggs.

The Strangest Nest

The strangest nest of all may be the white-nest swiftlet's. A swiftlet is a small bird that lives in Asian nations such as India and Thailand. What makes this bird's nest so strange?

A swiftlet nest is made of a goo that comes from the bird's mouth. That's right, the swiftlet spits out its nest! The goo comes out looking like long, wet noodles. The bird takes about a month to weave this sticky stuff into a cup-shaped nest. Soon, the goo dries out and becomes strong and sturdy.

Some people make soup from these nests. They really do! Workers use rope ladders to collect them from cliffs and cave roofs. Then cooks make it into soup and serve it in restaurants.

Why would people eat bird's nest soup? They believe that swiftlet goo will make them look and feel younger and healthier.

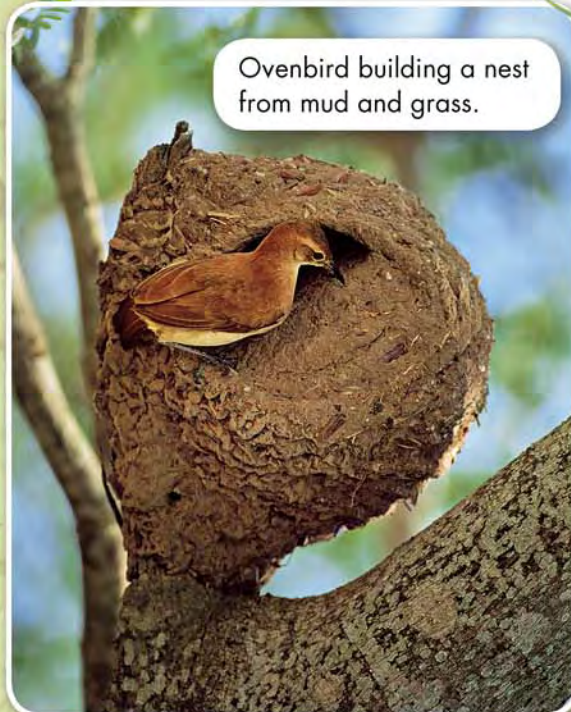


Bird's nest soup!

Amazing Birds

How do birds learn how to build these strange and amazing nests? Who teaches them?

No one. When a bird builds a nest for the first time, it has never seen one made before. The bird does not have to think about what it is doing. It just “knows” what to do. Just like you and I know how to breathe.



Ovenbird building a nest from mud and grass.



Atlantic Puffin collecting sticks and grass for a nest.



Northern Gannet using seaweed and algae to build nest.

But that doesn't mean that building a nest is an easy job. Far from it. Think about the 500 trips a weaver bird must make to bring back the grass to build its nest. Or the dozen different kinds of knots it uses to weave it.

And remember that birds must do nearly the whole job with their beak, along with a little help from their feet. That would be like you using only a finger and thumb on one hand.

Try building a nest some time from a pile of thin twigs, roots, and grass. Birds are amazing animals, and they build amazing homes.

